

Victorian Motherhood in the Art of Lilly Martin Spencer

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Victorian ideology in the 19th-century United States re-shaped the social landscape considerably, delineating a new model for gender roles and the ideal family structure that would distinguish members of the emerging middle and upper classes. The booming economic development of the era necessitated a new division of labor, resulting in the constitution of separate spheres based on gender. Women were confined to the private sphere of the home by Victorian domesticity, where they were regarded as the guardian angels of the family. Being devoted mothers was among the chief responsibilities expected of them in the home, which was popularized in various novels, self-help books on domesticity, and widely circulated women's magazines. Genre paintings disseminated through art unions also comprised a fashionable form of representation of Victorian values and lifestyle. This study investigates the ways in which Victorian motherhood was depicted in the mid-century in a selection of genre pictures by Lilly Martin Spencer (1822–1902), one of the first professionally recognized American woman painters of the era.

1. Motherhood in the Victorian period

The Victorian period, referring to the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901), is understood to have marked a unique cultural domain,

primarily a “transatlantic English-speaking subculture of Western civilization” (Howe 508). Interestingly, “Victorian culture was experienced more intensely in the United States than in Victoria’s homeland” (Howe 508), where the Victorian cultural pattern associated with the emerging middle class was at variance with traditionalist aristocratic cultural patterns. Naturally, this does not mean that American Victorianism did not have its critics: it was at odds with people with conservative values who gave preference to a society structured and differentiated in the traditional manner, supporting the patriarchal family model and the republican ideal of natural aristocracy, among other things, against a more democratic and egalitarian social model (Lubin 138; Masten 351).

In this sense, Victorianism may be regarded as reflective of a progressive social turn of the era. It introduced a new gender-based division of labor in family life, for example, where “[m]en conducted the family’s business, financial, and political affairs outside the home [while] women supervised the children, guarded the family’s religious and moral values, and provided comfort and tranquility for their husbands in a well-run household” (Buettner 15). The private became the realm of the woman through the cult of domesticity, where female authority expanded at the expense of traditional patriarchy. The presumed moral authority at the home also laid the groundwork for leisured women to enter into the public sphere and assume a public voice, as was the case with women involved in the temperance movement, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frances Willard, and the abolitionist and suffragist movements, such as Lucretia Moss, Martha Coffin Wright, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony. Victorianism, therefore, established a social milieu and a cultural context in which women could initiate changes and set out on their march for political recognition and socio-economic equality.

On the other hand, people envisioning a more progressive or utopian society, including the same suffragists and feminists, utopian socialists such as Robert Owen, and the Fourierists Albert Brisbane and Horace Greeley, harshly criticized Victorian ideology and its attendant economic, political, and social structure, and envisioned a more democratic, equal, and humane society all around. They frequently voiced criticism of the very same practices that others welcomed as progressive, amongst them the way gender roles were divided. They viewed the confinement of women to the home with disapproval, as a practice that excluded them from the real public realm where definitive political

discourses were taking shape, major decisions were being made, and business, finance, and industrial production thrived.

It was also found problematic that the series of practices through which the separate spheres were marked were frequently presented in essentialist categories. Female sexuality, for example, was considered in utilitarian terms first and foremost. Women's primary role within the family—and in fact, in society—was explained through their biological ability to give birth. Their bodily condition constituted them as reproductive agents, who therefore were presumed to be the fittest to assume all ensuing responsibilities tied to child-rearing. This line of logic was also supported by certain stereotypical features assigned to the female character as natural and innate, such as patience, affection, compassion, innocence, and submission, which rendered them genteel caregivers and educators of children. Their motherly duties bound them to the home, through an essentialist hegemonizing logic, which, for the most part, seemed impossible to challenge.

The Victorian age, therefore, was far from being a monolithic, strictly uniform period; it was much rather a highly contested era in which various ideals and ideologies waged a struggle for mainstream domination. Johns found that the various cultural phenomena that characterize mid-19th-century American society may be effectively revealed through a careful reading of genre painting, so popular in the US between the 1830s and the Civil War (xi). Flemish in origin, this genre first appeared in the 16th century, and depicted commonplace scenes with average people engaged in everyday activities. While genre painting in the US “might have been about ordinary people, ... it was not about ordinary matters” (Johns 2). And motherhood was a distinct issue, by extension intertwined with the morality, the potential, the future achievements, and the ultimate destiny of the whole of the American nation.

It is worth noting that “[t]he cultural role of genre painting—namely, to identify social types, delineate their relationships, and anchor a social hierarchy—made it a potentially dangerous ground for women to explore, since it could evolve into a critique of the domestic realm” (Prieto 55). It would therefore be especially edifying to explore genre paintings depicting motherhood in the oeuvre of one of the most celebrated female artists of domesticity at the time, Lilly Martin Spencer. Her figure united many of the contesting positions and ideologies of the age: she was not only the daughter of Fourierist parents, a wife in a happy

marriage, a devoted mother, and a practicing child-rearer, but also a painter with unique artistic drives and a professional artist living off the market. An iconological exploration of her images hopefully reveals how she portrayed Victorian motherhood, what informed her depictions regarding the forms of representation, and how various positions and forces in her life intersected in her art, making it a balancing act structured around market forces and morality.

2. Spencer and her images of motherhood

Spencer was born in England to French immigrants, who moved to the US when she was 9 years of age. She spent most of her childhood years on an Ohio farm where her parents, both followers of Fourier, planned to establish a phalanx. Her mother was also an avowed feminist and a schoolteacher, who supported her daughter's art education; Spencer thus moved to Cincinnati as a young woman to take art courses. It was there that she fell in love with Benjamin R. Spencer, a tailor, and married him at the age of 22, sharing the rest of her life with him in what she herself described as a blissful marriage. The couple ignored both the traditional patriarchal family model and that of Victorianism as well: as a renowned genre painter, she assumed financial responsibility for her family, while her husband stayed at home, taking care of household chores and their children as well as helping out in the studio. The couple had thirteen children, seven of whom lived to reach adulthood. Their life as a family seems to have been the embodiment of lower middle-class Victorian ideals, as their marriage was filled with romantic affection, they embraced their children with love and care, and, despite recurring financial hardships, they stayed together, apparently exemplifying the modern loving family.

Spencer's images focused on themes related to family life, primarily topics of the "maternal, infantine, and feminine" (Prieto 56), portraying women as mothers, wives, and maids, performing their womanly household chores, while men as husbands and fathers often appear as somehow ill-at-ease within the realm of the home. While contemporary art critics, such as Johns, Katz, Lubin, and Masten, are primarily drawn to images of "working housewives or cooks who prepare meals in kitchens cluttered with ingredients and utensils" (Bjelajac 190) in order to map the politics of art and gender relations in the antebellum period, Spencer's

sentimental paintings of family life also deserve a closer look. The majority of these were completed during her most prolific period in New York between 1848 and 1858, as an up and coming artist and a young mother. Consequently, a number of these images are in fact portraits of her family: she used her husband and young children as models for these paintings, often also placing her self-portrait on the canvas.

The picture that earned her great fame instantly and established her reputation as a painter of domestic sentimentality was *Domestic Happiness* (Figure 1). A romantic portrait of a young family, the painting captures a serene moment in the privacy of the nursery, in which the parents look tenderly at their adorable children asleep on the soft white bed. The babies are depicted as perfect, white-skinned, blonde, curly-haired, innocent angels, while the mother's figure, "with a face from Raphael and golden softness from Titian" (Lubin 138), evokes classical images of the Madonna. The warmth of the colors and supplementing contours, the softness of the fabrics portrayed, and the gently curving lines that connect the four figures in the composition all radiate the tender harmony which unite the family.

The mother seems to command over the view and, therefore, over the whole family: she stands before the father, closer to the children, as a mediator between their worlds, and gently asks the husband to be quiet with her raised hand. This, notes Masten, is an image that captures the Victorian egalitarian family model in three ways: "Love and harmony are depicted in the intimate proximity and shared feelings of the couple. Equality is shown in the mother's raised hand: clearly she has authority over the father, at least in the domestic sphere. And even more radical is the mutual agreement that the children's need to sleep takes precedence over either parent's desire to speak" (358).

Conversation Piece (Figure 2) is another family self-portrait, depicting the mother sitting on a chair, holding their third son, looking down at him, and taking pleasure at the sight, as does the father, who is attempting to entertain the boy. This father figure is very different from that of the stiff, cold patriarch that had traditionally been preferred in American culture. On arriving home, his attention immediate turns to his child, with the pre-poured drink awaiting him on the table is left untouched. Unlike the previous painting, this one does not take place in the more intimate parts of a private home, but captures a cherished moment in the parlor. It resonates both parents' unconditional devotion to their child, who ultimately commands the scene and the attention of both

adults: their love is subservient to the child, in accordance with contemporary Victorian expectations.

Another image of her family is *Fi! Fo! Fum!* (Figure 3). It captures the father as he is telling the story of “Jack and the Beanstalk” to his two daughters, holding on to them tight, as if protecting them from any of the negative turns the tale may take, or perhaps finding security for himself. He is fully immersed in the narration, as indicated by his posture and facial expression, through which he is visually connected to the younger girl. The older one already has her doubts about the truth value of the story, as her position and the look on her face signify. Meanwhile, the mother, Spencer herself, observes the situation as an outsider, warmly smiling at the child-like joy of the others.

In some of her works, Spencer portrayed intimate moments between mother and child, such as in *This Little Piggy Went to Market* (Figure 4). These pictures capture private moments of a mother and her child: the mother is taking time to play with her baby. She is not pressured by work or other responsibilities, but is completely lost in such moments of joy. Time stands still as mother and child are bound together in an instant of love and joy, and their angelic, innocent faces convey the Victorian understanding of the natural condition of children and women. They are portrayed in a highly theatrical setting: a luxuriant canopy enveloping much of the cozy white bed; a richly decorated Persian rug on the floor; the finely dressed mother figure seated in the middle, as if center stage; and her baby looking out at the spectator with a radiant smile.

Similarly to Spencer’s other paintings of motherhood, this image “supplies a domestic model of utopian harmony” (Katz 62). Lubin, however, offers another interpretation. He argues that because of the hardness of the surface, the brilliant colors, the sharp edges, and detailed lines, this depiction of a “latter-day Madonna ... is to be taken more as a joke than a pledge of allegiance to the middle-class sentimental creed” (144–145). Moreover, he considers the title, which is also the initial line of a popular nursery rhyme, as expressive of Spencer’s criticism of contemporary economic divisions in society, and of her rejection of the Victorian social structure associated with them.

3. Motherhood on stage

A unique feature of Spencer's art, argues Johns, is that she offers an insider's view of the domestic sphere: "Spencer was also almost alone in constructing images of a type from within an implied group" (160). Prieto also observes how in Spencer's oeuvre, two segments of her identity, the domestic and the professional, were intricately intertwined (56). These may perhaps best be observed through her paintings of Victorian motherhood. The images discussed above are all self-portraits as far as motherly roles and positions are concerned. The intimacy, light-hearted joy, and pride these images radiate derive from Spencer's first-hand experience as a young mother, with as yet only a handful of children among them during the period under investigation.

Prieto also notes that Spencer's paintings "promote sentimental family" (56), but she implies that the relation between Spencer's private and professional selves is most obviously captured in *Fi! Fo! Fum!* (Figure 3). The mother figure in this image is placed in the position of an observer, but in fact an implied parallel may be drawn between the mother figure and the "ultimate observer of the scene: the artist. This suggests a compatibility, or even equality, between the social roles of mother and painter" (56–57). This equation conveys the most vital aspect of her as an artist of Victorian motherhood, and at the heart of this lies the intersection of her two positions, united through the issues of success and morality.

As the breadwinner of her family, Spencer was well aware of the fact that her pictures must cater to the demands of the market. She was especially conscious of expectations placed on her as an artist and was willing to play along. Masten, for example, describes an incident that demonstrates this quite well: already as a young artist, she told a journalist from New York that she was financially successful, when in fact they were living in poverty. When her mother asked about it, she responded: "You know when a person wants to get along they must shake their nails in their pockets when they have no money" (Masten 353). She did what common sense dictated in order to keep up appearances.

The images she created at the beginning of her career were mainly devoted to the allegorical and literary themes that she enjoyed painting. However, these were not very fashionable at the time; she therefore decided to turn to themes of domesticity. Her scenes, marketed through the art unions and the Cosmopolitan Art Association, "found a receptive

audience among quite unsophisticated middle-class viewers” (Bjelajac 191). She saw clearly the social expectations at work in the professional world in general, and within her designated audience in particular, so she tailored her images to match these: she offered the idealized, utopian image of her own experience as a mother, presented with sentimental undertones to adapt them to Victorian fashion.

An element of this tailoring was the recognition that her audience also needed to be educated: her paintings were not mere depictions of her family life as she experienced it, but had significant didactic overtones, indoctrinating spectators in the cult of motherhood. She wrote early on to her mother: “I want to try to make all my painting have a tendency toward morall [*sic!*] improvement as far as it is in the power of painting” (Masten 357). Her paintings provided a model for Victorian sentimental family life, married with American egalitarianism, and rooted in the values of American democracy, because of which women embraced equality and independence, at least within their sphere of the domestic.

Spencer’s self-positioning as creator of idealized images that uplift morality can be related to their theatrical setting, especially noticeable in her nursery paintings, such as *This Little Piggy Went to Market* (Figure 4). The theatricality of the painting signifies a key context in which the ideological positioning of the painting may best be captured. The painting can be interpreted in terms of Goffman’s dramaturgy, which conceptualizes social interaction through the metaphor of theatrical performance: that is, in daily interaction people play certain roles, as dictated by social expectations, in the course of which, through impression management, they also manage the way they are perceived by others. The stage creates the space for the presentation of idealized performances that may also provide the models for interaction with normalizing tendencies. Following this logic, it can be presumed that this is therefore also the platform for social change, i.e. the indoctrination of new types of roles and interaction that demand entry into the social world.

As for culture’s social presence, Goffman notes, “[t]he cultural and dramaturgical perspectives intersect most clearly in regard to the maintaining of moral standards. The cultural values of an establishment will determine in detail how the participants are to feel about many matters and at the time establish a framework of appearances that must be maintained, whether or not there is feeling behind the appearances” (241–42). Spencer’s paintings can be interpreted as representations of the proper performance of the new motherhood initiated by Victorianism,

idealizing this new cultural construct, transmitting its values and moral standings, and filled with both joy and gentility, which seem to be genuine feelings in support of the construct.

Another unique feature of these paintings is the fact that Spencer, through painting the familial, brought the private sphere of mothering, i.e. a performance in the Goffmanian back region, to the public view, revealing how model Victorian motherhood was to be done in the privacy of the nursery or the bedroom. While structurally she drew on traditional, often devotional depictions of Mother and Child, she did away entirely with the religious implications of the Madonna motif in the sense that she signified the Victorian mother as a joyful, playful, and light-hearted figure, who enjoys traditional forms of enjoyment that derive from childhood entertainment. The intimacy of the scene, however, is maintained by the shape of the painting: the arched top or oval shape employed in the framing of some of her nursery paintings both softens and distances the view and transforms the experience into a moment of quiet, an untroubling personal glimpse for the viewer into how proper motherhood is done in the intimate private sphere.

Butler comments that “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for liberatory contestation” (333). As a category of identification in Spencer’s paintings, motherhood seems to serve the purposes of gender liberation at the expense of the traditionalist religious and socially conservative currents that proposed that female existence was epitomized by the figure of Eve, by her evil nature that had brought upon humanity its fallen condition, in consequence of which strong patriarchal dominance was required on earth in order to earn the possibility of salvation in heaven. Instead, Spencer offered the ideological model of Victorian motherhood, that operated as a new normalizing category of identity in the service of the new power relations introduced by capitalist economic production, and expressed by Victorian ideology. This is one possible way to locate Spencer’s depictions of motherhood within the matrix of contemporary ideological positionings on gender and society.

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Figures



Figure 1. Spencer, Lilly M. *Domestic Happiness (Hush! Don't Wake Them)*. 1848. Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan.
Detroit Institute of Arts. Web. 25 May 2010.



Figure 2. Spencer, Lilly M. *Conversation Piece*. 1851–52. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. *Metropolitan Museum of Art*. Web. 25 May 2010.



Figure 3. Spencer, Lilly M. *Fi! Fo! Fum!* 1858. Betz, Mr. And Mrs. Joseph, Fort Lauderdale, Florida. *AHWA*. Web. 25 May 2010.



Figure 4. Spencer, Lilly M. *This Little Piggy Went to Market*. 1857. Ohio Historical Society, Campus Martius Museum, Marietta, Ohio. *The Athenaeum*. Web. 25 May 2010.